Roots
Deuteronomy 26:5-11
Communion Meditation

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The Jewish writer, Elie Wiesel, tells the story of the great Rabbi who, when his people were threatened, would go into the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Later, when his disciple had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with Heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished. Still later, in order to save his people once more, a third generation Rabbi would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished. Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can to is tell the story. And this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient. (Sam Keen, To A Dancing God, p.82-83)

Theologians and philosophers know the importance of stories: so do children. Rabbinical literature knows how essential stories are. The story of a people is what makes them a people. The story, out of the dim past, handed down from generation to generation, is what tells people who they are.

No one in history ever knew that more thoroughly than the Jews. When they escaped from slavery in Egypt and spent forty years wandering in the wilderness it became very important not to forget how it all had begun. And so their religious rituals heavily emphasized remembering: liturgical acts were prescribed which recalled great events in the past: remembering was a major part of what it meant to believe. After they settled in the land and became an agrarian rather than a nomadic people it became doubly important to remember who they really were. Yearly, at the Feast of Weeks, the head of each family brought a basket of fruit to the altar in the Temple. The fruit symbolized the gift of the land Jahweh had given them. And as it was presented on the altar, the ritual required the worshiper to say: "A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number..." and so on, until the whole story of their Exodus and conquest of the new land was completed. "A wandering Aramean was my father.: That is to say: this is who we really are. We may look like wealthy farmers, but we're really just relatives of a nomad who one day wandered down into Egypt in search of food.

William Muehl observes: "...this is the glory of Israel, is it not? That its God is remembered. Not simply believed in as a working hypothesis. Not merely acknowledged in a rational fashion. Not defiantly affirmed as one affirms an unpopular truth. But remembered in an almost sensuous way, much as one recalls the dramatic moments of his personal past...There is about many Jews the kind of aplomb which comes of having in one's own parlor the things which other men only see in museums." (All the Damned Angels, p.102).

The story is what gives a people identity. More than that the story of who they are gives them something to live and die for. Valley Forge: "O say can you see by the dawn's early light": "Four score and seven years ago our forefathers..."

One of the most interesting phenomenon to occur for a long time was the incredible popularity of television's serialized version of Roots. No one, I take it, expected it to be such a smash. Even the people who are paid to know such things were surprised. Obviously, black people found it terribly intriguing. In interviews later many said that although the series told them little they didn't already know, it was presented in such a manner as to tell them who they really were, for the first time. And for those it was a very good and healthy experience.

Even more interesting is the fact that white people also seemed to gain a sense of their own story: not simply that our relatives did that to their relatives - although it was rightfully a part of it. But that each of us has a story: each of us has roots somewhere back there. None of us began here.

The best part of the book was the last chapter in which Alex Haley described the torturous, twelve year labor of research. As he began to collect data, and as it became clear that he could complete the project in an historically, respectable manner, he traveled back to Tennessee to see an elderly aunt who was very ill. As a boy he had heard her tell the old stories about slavery and their forebears. When he related what he had in mind - how he intended to discover everything there was to know about their family and write a book, she aroused from her sick bed, approved of the project with great animation and said: "They's all up there watchin' you."

Armed with a few African words and fragments of a story about a young boy making a drum in the forest and being captured by slave traders, Haley finally isolated one village in Gambia as the probable home of his ancestors. Through the offices of anthropologists, linguists and translators he was put in touch with a Griot, an old villager whose job it was to know and to recite the entire history of the particular village. Haley listened carefully for hour after hour as the old man told about every individual who was ever born in the village. Finally, in what amounted almost to a footnote, he mentioned KUNTA KINTE, son of Omoro, who went into the forest to carve a drum and was seen no more. He was home. Slowly he told the Griot the momentous discovery they had just made: the people of the village were told and very carefully they approached and touched him. Haley describes it as the most moving incident in his entire life. He knew who he was: he had discovered his roots.

That hits us, I think, because we have short memories. Somehow, we have gotten the impression that the past is not very important: that our immediate generation is sufficient unto itself: that we are who we are on the basis of what we have managed to accomplish in our own lifetime. How revealing that most of us don't know very much, if anything, about our great grandparents.

Elton Trueblood wrote somewhere about this "cut-flower civilization" of ours; beautiful, fragrant but always in danger of dying because it is cut off from its life-giving roots. Sam Keen, philosopher, observes that "Modern man has lost his way in the forest, he cannot light the fire or say the prayer, and he is dangerously close to losing his ability to see his life as part of any story." (op cit p.85).

Religion is the repository of the story - but in our time we act as if we believe that faith is totally subjective; dependent on my immediate emotional responses. We will turn our back on our story at the drop of a hat if a new brand of piety makes us feel better and promises to get us to Heaven quicker and then have the temerity to call it conversion.

William Muehle, who wrote so sensitively about remembering as an act of faith for the Jews, observes that "...most of us in the twentieth century are doubly disinherited, the victims of several estrangements. We do not remember Jerusalem. But neither do we remember Bethlehem, Rome, Avignon, Worms, Geneva, Canterbury, or for that matter the little brown church in the dell. Most modern men have no memory of God at all." (op cit p.105).

Which brings me to Lent and Communion and Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew. We must never forget that. And part of what that meant to Him was that He knew the story: He knew who He was in light of the story: He knew the power of stories to tell others who they were and to give them a reason to live and die. Surely He told stories to His disciples: that is what is so terribly important about the story of His temptations in the wilderness, the First Lesson this morning, and the traditional Gospel Lesson for the First Sunday in Lent. Literally everything else in the Gospel accounts conceivably could have been included in the story because someone witnessed it. But in this story Jesus is alone, totally: it occurs before he even knew Peter, James, John and the others. There is only one way that story survived and it is that Jesus Himself told it to His disciples, and told it with enough frequency and emphasis that they made it part of the story. "This is who I am," He must have told them: "the one who spent forty days in the wilderness: the one who faced some very difficult temptations and through it all maintained my integrity. When you remember, don't ever forget that part."

Jesus remained - a Jew. He knew the story of His people, but He was aware also that, through Him, God was writing a new chapter. And so when He sensed that the end of His own life had come; on that dark night when the net of conspiracy was tightening around Him, He suggested that they take special pains to eat a last supper together. At that meal He took the food substances they would eat and drink every day of their lives and turned them into religious symbols - reminders of the story with a new chapter. "Every time you eat this bread and drink this wine, remember me." They did - and we do.

That's what Lent is for: a forty day period of time for remembering. In the midst of turmoil in the near East, tragedy in Uganda, a new budget at home, a fuel crisis in Ohio and schools closed in Columbus, a time to tell and hear and remember the story of God and His love. Lent is the time, it has always seemed to me, to say again who we are: that in and through everything else about us - above everything else about us - we are followers of Jesus the Christ.

You and I are many people: parents, doctors, teachers, homemakers, attorneys, nurses, bankers. You and I have many roots - ethnic, geographic; Scotland, England, Ireland, Germany, France, Poland, Nigeria, India, China. But this is most important of all. Here are our real roots.

As the ancients brought a basket of fruit to the altar and recited "A wandering Aramean was my father..." so we, in our time take bread and wine and recite, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in His son, Jesus Christ our Lord who - suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." In Creed and Communion - today - we reaffirm our roots.

The Lord Jesus, on the night of His arrest, took bread, and after giving thanks to God, broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you; do this remembering me." In the same way, He took the cup and said, "This is the new Covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this, remembering me."

Let us remember the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.